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THE EVOLUTION OF IMPRESSIONISM. BY OTTO STARK



IN these days of strife between the impressionists and their opponents, it may not be amiss to look backward, and allow to pass in review, after a manner, the many changes which the movement has undergone, leading up to and culminating in modern color impressionism. This seems to me timely also from the fact that the meaning of the term appears to be either indefinite or perverted in the minds of a great number of those interested, both the sympathetic and the antagonistic. The Centennial Exposition at Philadelphia, with its art exhibition, can be considered as the real starting point of American art and impressionism in the modern sense, as through it a new ideal of the beautiful was established; or, at least a foundation was laid upon which to build. The display of foreign work in painting and sculpture, especially the former, opened the eyes of the American spectators to new things and methods, and doomed the then prevalent style and method of painting, of which Cropsey, Bierstadt, and others were the principal exponents, the Hudson River school, so called because never satisfied with the near-at-hand and simple, seeking the panoramic in landscape rather than the picturesque. Of figure painters, with a few notable exceptions, we had very few who were good, the tendency of nearly all their work and effort resulting in the dominion of cheap art. Who does not recall these pictures, flashy in color, smooth in painting, popular according to the successfulness with which they told a story, which, when a joke, was better still; figures painted without regard to surroundings and considered good when they were, as the popular phrase would have it, finished, which meant that the work was polished and "cooked up" in the best style.

With the Centennial, or shortly after it, however, came a revolution, brought about by some of our best students returning from abroad, or sending their work home. Munich men took the lead, and the pictures and studies of such men as Chase, Duveneck and Shirlaw were a protest against the superficial, gaudy and unreal style then prevalent in American paintings. The marvelous technique, blackness (as we see and understand it now), love of simplicity in subject and treatment, breadth and vigor were a new revelation, and the "popular" painting could not withstand it long. The very faults of the Munich school were virtues, judged by the needs of the times. The blackness, for instance, was at times so pronounced that I well remember a saying, which became notorious in New York, of an artist who, standing before a water color by Currier, another of the American leaders of the period, which represented a road with trees silhouetted against a

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rainy sky, being asked what they were, answered, "Why, Ivory black of course"; and yet, this blackness and brownness had a mission to fulfill and did fill it, in bringing on a revolt against the wrong color sense of the period. But life means progress, and though the Munich movement had the effect of making us impatient with what it was a protest against, it nevertheless carried within itself that which was to doom it or make it only a round in the ladder of an upward movement in art, rather than a final achievement. A protest against it came very soon, in the so-called gray movement, brought mainly from France, and a more rigid method of drawing was sought after. The fine technique, simplicity and breadth of handling, was retained, but gray predominated as contrasted to the black and browns of the Munich method. This striving for grays was the result of the work carried on out of doors, or the "plein air" movement, which was making itself felt about that period.

This I consider the mightiest movement of modern times. With it came a new conception of nature, not confined to out-of-doors nature alone, for it very soon reacted also upon the work in the studio and in the house. Air and light were sought after as never before. The result of all this was shown in pictures, beautiful in repose, harmonious in tone, generally without shrill notes of any kind; good in values, in a monotone sense, but still lacking in light and colors. Working out of doors, painters could not help being attracted by sunlight, and serious attempts were made at rendering it. With this came still another movement, the so-called "high key" in painting, which meant to paint as light and as near white as the palette would allow, and well do I remember walking through exhibitions where a large percentage of canvases looked like white-washed fences, the paint being plastered on in a manner which reminded one of mortar put on with the trowel of a stone mason. Still it was not sunlight.

Gradually, working almost isolated, derided and scorned, came the present-day color impressionists. Their canvases began appearing, at first rarely, then more often, and now very often in the exhibitions. The conservatives protested, expostulated, became frantic and desperate in their efforts to stem the tide, but still it kept coming, gaining strength and new converts from year to year, until it had changed the aspect of our exhibitions as entirely as the sun changes night into day, and the conservatives themselves were against their will influenced by it. Finding, as the exhibitions became lighter and brighter, from season to season, their own work by contrast becoming correspondingly darker, they finally began to see that after all there was something worth studying in the new color movement. Very extravagant was, and still is, the work of the extremists; but we should not forget that revolutions are always brought about, in every department of human endeavor, not by those walking the

middle road, but by extremists, and the difference between a crank and a reformer usually is, in the eyes of the majority, the difference between failure and success; though this rule can hardly be applied in discerning between a fashion, or a fad, and a revolution. This movement of color impressionism has proved itself to be a revolution by its staying qualities, and the influence it has had upon art and artists, as well as the public at large, in changing and leading forward many of our generation to a new idea of color, and opening their eyes to new beauties in nature, very often perhaps unconsciously. And while a great deal of the work done has been extreme, sacrificing everything to the qualities of color, movement, vibration and light, so that at times, at least, the uninitiated (and I suspect the supposed-to-be-initiated as well) could not tell which was top and which bottom of these pictures; yet the influence this work has had upon modern art, and especially American art, is hardly appreciated as yet. I consider that we are not at the end of it; beautiful work has been done, but still more beautiful is to come.

In visiting the art exhibition of the World's Fair, wandering through those innumerable galleries of paintings of all nations and peoples of the civilized world, I suddenly found myself in the rooms of the Swedish exhibit. I was almost overwhelmed with its strangeness. The effect it had upon me was like leaving a room or house filled with the polluted atmosphere caused by bad ventilation, and stepping out into the fresh air. My eyes were dazzled by the diffused light coming and surrounding me from all sides, and as I looked around, standing in the centre of each of these rooms, I saw that this group of painters (group I call them, because there were not many as compared to the great numbers represented from other countries) had attained as a number that which I had felt wanting in the works of most impressionists of other countries, a complete color value, or harmony of color. It seemed to me a realization of what others had been striving for, but as yet only successfully attained in single pictures or by single individuals; surely, I thought, one need have no especial education in art and painting to appreciate these. But speaking to my companions, who were not artists, I found that though they felt the same thrill of emotion in passing into this new revelation as I had, the beauty of these pictures, singly, was still hidden to them, that they still saw only crude colors where I saw beautiful impressions of nature. Then I fully realized what a change had overtaken me since the time when I would lie on my back on grassy slopes, with my head downwards, or look at nature with my head upside down, the art student's trick to see color exclusive of form.

The point I wish to make is this: I have found in nearly every case where impressionism is mentioned, that the word conveys an idea meaning color vibration, or crudity in color, to objectors, yet the

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word was used in an entirely different sense at the time of the Munich movement, so-called. Impressionists of that period were painters who worked in and searched for tone, quality and technique, painting in blacks and browns, colors being held in a low key. Those who, breaking loose from this blackishness and brownishness, worked in grays brought on by the "plein air" movement, were also called impressionists. Their impressionism consisted in striving to convey the diffused atmospheric light effects; harmony was one of the principal achievements, and value in the sense of monotone value. Impressionists again those were called who lead in the "high key" or "white" movement, and this finally leading up to the color movement, we have again impressionism; but this time in color.

As I look backwards it seems to me I see the movements following each other and classified by their hues and colors; at first the black or brown, next the gray, followed by white and finally by color, each distinct from the other, and yet one leading the way towards the other.

Impressionism to me has always meant the retaining of the first impression which nature makes upon us as we approach her, be it of tone, quality, harmony, light, vibration, force, delicacy, color, etc.; and rendering this impression, if necessary, to the exclusion or at the sacrifice of details or other qualities and characteristics not so essential or vital, and rendering it unhampered by tradition and conventionalities.

What will be the the next word is hard to say, unless it be individualism, and for American art Americanism. It seems to me I already see the beginning of a new move in this direction, and as everything genuine and of value is soon counterfeited, I can see in my mind the endless extravagances that will be indulged in by mediocrity under this name, choosing and following a method and movement not because understanding it, but because it is the order of the day.

Or is it not possible that if the present movement in color goes to seed, we may witness a reaction and see the experience of the last decade repeated on a higher plane?

However this may be, surely the strife will go on, and the hopeful part of it all is that strife means life and life is progress.